Classic building's elegance restored

Restored Utah Capitol remains a reminder of how early factional rivalries were reconciled.

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After extensive updating and renovation, the Utah... (Francisco Kjolseth/The Salt Lake Tribune)

Utah's Capitol symbolizes more than the usual classical ideals of democracy found in other grandiose government architecture. The domed edifice overlooking the Salt Lake Valley represents, some historians argue, the closing of terrible wounds that long separated the state's Mormon majority from other cultures that had settled the state.

From about 1858 to 1896, Utah was divided in a conflict between Mormons and non-Mormons. At its worst, U.S. troops occupied the state and a non-Mormon wagon train was massacred at Mountain Meadows near Cedar City.

Even after Utah won statehood in 1896 by guaranteeing the separation of church and state and ending polygamy, historian Geraldine H. Clayton says, "Those scars of 49 years [since 1847] of conflict were not sufficiently healed for the idea of an architectural symbol of statehood to be addressed." An economic depression in the 1890s didn't help.

It would take another decade before the state's factions would be able to work together to even plan a statehouse.

The Capitol is Utah's second legislative building. The first was built in the 1850s in Fillmore by Truman O. Angell, the designer of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints' Salt Lake Temple. The Legislature held one session in the Millard County building before moving back to Salt Lake City.

It took a windfall in tax money in 1909 to finally start the process of building a new Capitol. The state began enforcing a dormant inheritance tax just in time to dip into the estate of railroad magnate E.H. Harriman. The tax brought in $800,000 - enough to start work on a Statehouse that would ultimately cost about $2.5 million.

The Utah Capitol, which looks similar enough to the U.S. Capitol to have been used as a stand-in in films, has all the elements considered necessary at the time in a symbol of democracy: balanced wings, Greek and Roman columns and ornamentation and, of course, a towering dome.

The exterior is constructed of what is known as Utah granite, quarried from the same pits in Little Cottonwood Canyon as the blocks for the Salt Lake Temple and, much later, the LDS Conference Center.

The Capitol's designer, Richard Karl August Kletting, was an emigrant from Germany trained in European design. He designed the original Salt Palace and Saltair but, at age 52, Utah's Capitol would be his last major design.

Despite the building's conventional exterior, Capitol architect David Hart says Kletting proved to be a risk-taker when it came to interior design. "He liked to play with light," Hart says of the expansive interiors lit with natural illumination from skylights and windows.

And though the Victorian period was noted for deep colors, "red reds, blue blues," again, "Kletting was a big risk-taker in color," Hart says. Kletting chose subtle pastels to paint walls and details of crests and mythological creatures that ornament the Capitol. Sometimes several shades of a pastel detail a ceiling. And Kletting daringly chose dozens of beige and brown tones for many rooms. Later stewards of the Capitol painted over the original colors with shades then popular.

Through research, the restoration teams were able to recover and restore Kletting's intentions and even carried through many of the design ideas he was never able to complete after his funding ran out.

A less visible result of the restoration project is a safer, more functional Capitol. Though the public areas have painstakingly been returned to historical accuracy, the administrative facilities are modern and flexible, equipped with state-of-the-art communications and security equipment.

"Over time, things change and functions change," Hart says. "The Capitol can be modified to meet new needs."